

Disabled Travelers to Antarctica

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Introduction:

Historically, Antarctica has been a place only accessible in the far reaches of man's imagination. So much was unknown about this mysterious white land at the bottom of the earth till the first explorers began crossing into the uncharted territories. A few courageous adventurers braved the elements during the heroic age from 1898 to 1917. Their stories brought life to a seemingly dead wasteland. However, it was still only available to the select few with funding, a strong desire to prove themselves in the world or a yearning for a grand adventure. This changed in the 1950's with the start of a tourist industry in Antarctica. Now the numbers traveling to Antarctica every year are growing exponentially with 2008/2009 having numbers hovering around 40,000 visitors (IAATO, 2008). No longer do you need to be a fit, white male with a perfect medical exam to partake in such an endeavor. People with physical limitations have defied the odds to make the journey in the past, are doing so in the present and will continue in the future. Disabled travelers heading to Antarctica is a potential issue in the near future for Antarctic Tourism.

Section 1: Background on Disabilities

1.1 Definition

The true definition of a disabled person has always been at the forefront of human rights arguments. The American Disabilities Act describes it as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of having such impairment". The types of limitations can be categorized into four major groups; hearing impairments, vision impairments, mental disabilities and physical limitations. 500 million people have a disability worldwide. This translates to 1 out of every 8 people (Y. Ozturk et al, 2007). Statistics show that by the year 2030 the US population will consist of 100 Million people with a disability (Burnett & Bender, 2001).

1.2 Rights

After concluding that a person is disabled, questions arise about rights. In general, most acts work to provide an equal quality of life for all. It is accepted that public places such as schools, stores, banks, post offices, cinema, sports facilities, restaurants, and museums must all comply with regulations of accommodation for disabled persons.

There are guidelines as to how much a place has to adapt to conform to disability regulations. In New Zealand, all new buildings must comply. Current public place accessed by 6 or more persons needs to be accessible. If however, a site or building is protected under a historical trust law then it is waved from these regulations (Disability Information Services). In the work force there are Equal Employment Opportunity laws to enforce justice and inclusion. Scott Base would fall under these obligations.

The United Nations states the rights of “everyone to take part in cultural life”. Human rights and cultural life are very ambiguous term especially when applied to tourism. The debate continues between traveling being a right or a luxury. The American Disabilities Act says that everyone should have the right to travel but making it happen is not a responsibility. “A Law can not guarantee what a culture can not give (Johnson, 2000)”

1.3 Culture

Having a disability does not discriminate based upon one’s nationality. However, different cultures view a disability differently. For example, in China, having a child with a disability or contracting a disability oneself was considered a punishment for a sin in this life or a pasted one. A more widely accepted view in China is that “a luxurious lifestyle doesn’t go with a disability. If you’re disabled you should live a simple life”(T.L. Packer et al., 2007). Due to these circumstances, one would most likely not find a disabled Asian person trying to go to Antarctica. Southeast Asian, Mexican and Native Americans see a disability as “a spiritual rather than physical phenomena [and] may be committed to spiritual rather than medical interventions.” (Stone, 2005) These issues would reveal themselves with care takers. In particular, on tourist ships where cultures would be in close contact. Some cultures have discrepancies with the gender of personal care takers or aids. In Vietnam, the sex must be the same whereas in Russia, it is of no concern. (Stone, 2005). Given that Antarctica is a collaboration of cultures, whose would be the dominating one? Ideally, all countries would live in harmony as is one of the principles of the Antarctic Treaty. In similar situations of the world a culture broker is utilized as a mediator. This establishes cultural competency, a service “responsive to issues related to culture, trace, gender, and sexual orientation...provided within the cultural context of the consumer” (Stone, 2005).

The United Nations states that “at the social level, there has also been an extremely positive development as increasing importance is attached to the integration of a disabled person in the community”. Well it has been established that integration overall is mutually beneficial there are still many unfortunate incidents of stereotyping towards disabled people. For instance, one may assume that a physical disability implies a mental one. When communicating, some people will speak louder while others will speak softer (Stone, 2005).

The best way for people to learn about disabilities is to be exposed to them. That is where it becomes the responsibility of disabled person to become active in their community and work towards becoming socially inclusive. These issues are not limited to Antarctica.

Section 2: Past disabled expeditions

2.1 Jim Henderson

In 1959, a New Zealand reporter was asked if he wanted to go to the South Pole for a special publicity trip. After he readily agreed, it occurred to him that there may be some problems with his prosthetic leg. His left leg was amputated close to the hip due to a battle wound. Upon going to see his doctor he said it would be fine. He was a pioneer in disabled travel to Antarctica. During his travels at McMurdo Jim reported how he handled his situation with a bit of comic relief. “Just sling her with an echoing thump under the bed when turning in, the pants still round her. The Americans make no comment whatsoever. She’s still there, waiting, a fraction colder for a bit, in the morning.”(Henderson, 1962) So Jim went about being the first person to stand at the South Pole with a disability that did not seem to limit him in anyway. He was paving the way for future travelers that would embark on similar journeys.

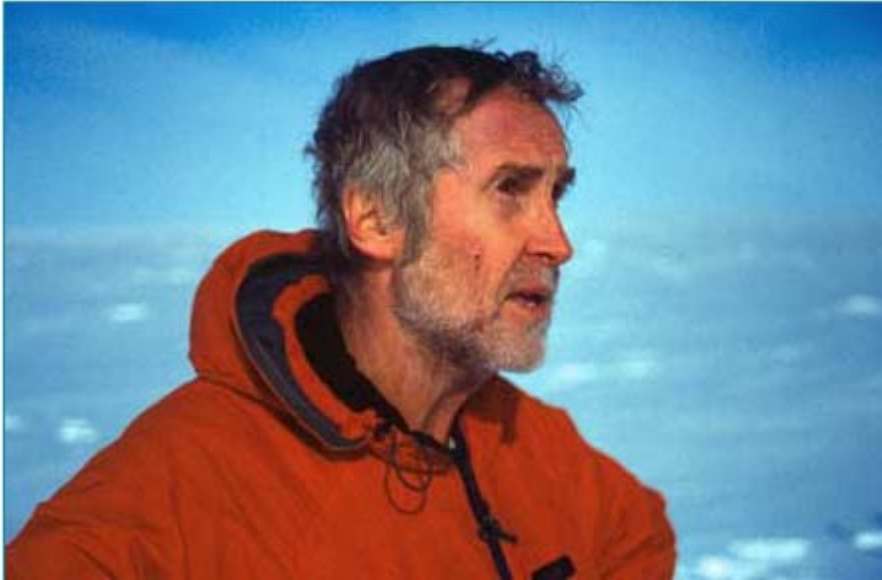
Figure 1: Jim Henderson’s prosthetic leg (Canterbury Museum Antarctic Collection 1985.324.1)



Section 3: Current disabled travelers

3.1 Miles Hilton-Barber

Figure2: Miles Hilton-Barber (Hilton-Barber, 2001)



In the 2000/2001 season, Miles Hilton-Barber skied across the Antarctic Continent to the South Pole. To his regret, after 37 days of travel, Hilton-Barber had to be airlifted out because the frost bite in his fingers had reached a dangerous degree due to his poor circulation. Nothing about his 25 years of being blind limited him. He had to adapt to his travel techniques and was lucky enough to have very loyal traveling partners. His private expedition was funded for this own goals and desires. He is a motivational speaker who likes to push the boundaries of the human will and sees no handicap in his blindness. So not to be a total dependent he took great care in placing his tent items in specific locations. He would always know where he kept his boots, food, cooker, etc next to his sleeping bag. When it came to eating Hilton-Barber would “strip off all the wrappers the night before in the tent, and keep [my] snacks in a plastic bag, using my mouth and tongue to identify my options at each break.” (Hilton-Barber, Midnight sun) As many explorers today do, he had to eat from the same bowl and mug without a clean out, wear the same set of clothes, shower with wet wipes, and live in extreme conditions.

Figure3: Miles learning to ski (Hilton-Barber, website)



Skiing was a different issue as Hilton-Barber had never skied before. This made traveling in Antarctica very difficult especially for the first 10 days. He found it was impractical for his friends to describe the terrain for him as it was always changing. Miles was able to adapt by trial and error. He used his ski poles and prods and assessed the terrain as he went. He tried feeling his way around with his ski tips but as he encountered sastrugi, he often fell over, hindering his fellow travelers. Thus being tied together was not successful. Finally, a break came as his balance and coordination improved and he learned the different sounds of skis. He would ski near someone and listen with his heightened sense of hearing. When the wind was blowing such that hearing was impossible he would pay close attention to the direction of the wind keeping it at a constant angle to his face (Hilton-Barber, *Midnight Sun*).

Connections can be drawn between earlier explorers and Hilton-Barber. Often both cases would be dealing with snow blindness and severe winds. Another similarity arose as extra attention was needed for Hilton-Barber. There were many a time when explorers would become incapacitated due to sickness or injury. It parallels the ways in which Hilton-Barber was treated from the start. “Day after day, week after week, he went out of his way to help me. Cooking my food, doing most of the exterior work around the tent, helping me in the morning sort out my ski bindings and ski poles, loading my sled, checking on me throughout the long, long days of skiing.” (Hilton-Barber, interview) Hilton-Barber fully realized that he would not have been able to make the trip without the “wordless care and support” (Hilton-Barber, interview) he constantly received from his travel partner Jon. Due to the nature of the expedition, Hilton-Barber was able to prove that if you put your mind to it, one can achieve anything. However, no explorer would have ever taken on the burden of such a helpless man from the start. Only in today’s age would this journey have been feasible.

3.2 Jan Mela

Another amazing story comes from a much younger subject, a 16 year old Polish boy with an amputated leg and arm. On the 31st of December 2004, Jan Mela crossed 188km to reach the South Pole. He was already aware of the extreme conditions as he had skied to the North Pole, making him the youngest disabled person to reach both poles in the same year. Jan was well prepared with intense training in Northern Poland. With his two travel companions, Marek Kaminski and Wojtek Ostrowski, they went swimming in the Baltic Sea, hauled tires to simulate sledges and did some rock climbing. There were also many doctor visits to prepare mentally and emotionally. The journey was a success and even the Pope put in a good word that “the expedition was not a necessity, but it was an efficient way to show the world that disability is not an obstacle to undertake even the most difficult tasks (Mela et al., 2001).”

The expedition had several other good outcomes. Lots of money was raised for modern artificial limbs. The coverage of the journey was televised throughout the world raising public awareness of disabilities. Over 60 million people viewed the program Together at the Pole completed by this expedition. It promoted everyone to “reach their own pole”. There were also many programs established that used the journey as an inspiration and educational tool. Basic questions were asked about Antarctica and its place in the world. Online programs were established to promote space exploration, renewable resources, and human ingenuity. Jan’s journey also inspired the story “Lulie the Iceberg” which was used in celebrating the World Day of the Sick, on January 11th.

Figure 4: John Mela in Antarctica (Mela et al., 2001)



3.3 Nancy Berger

Nate and Nancy Berger love to travel. When Nancy had a stroke becoming wheelchair bound 20 years ago, changes needed to be made in the way they traveled. Around the world they went to places beyond imagination writing a book entitled *Disabled Travelers Guide to the World*. One of their destinations was to the Antarctic Peninsula aboard the ship Hanseatic, run by the travel group Abercrombie and Kent. After lots of research on an appropriate ship, they were welcomed by a very accommodating captain and helpful group of guests. Nancy conquered a new frontier being the first woman in a wheelchair to visit Wilde Point, the location where Shackleton's Expedition was rescued in 1916. Nancy was also able to visit Deception Island where some adventuresome travelers bathed in homemade 'hot springs'. While Nancy was lucky to have such a wonderful experience she was only able to make it out in the Zodiacs for 8 out of the 11 excursions. She explains "I was unable to make several of the landings because the water was too rough. Although disappointed at the time, in retrospect there was no question it would have put me at too great a risk to try and leave the ship." (Berger, 2008). This susceptibility was forwarded by the captain saying there would be no problem as long as the seas were clam.

Figure 5: Nancy Berger at the 'hot pools' (Berger, 2008)



Figure 6: Nancy and Nate at Wilde Point (Berger, 2008)

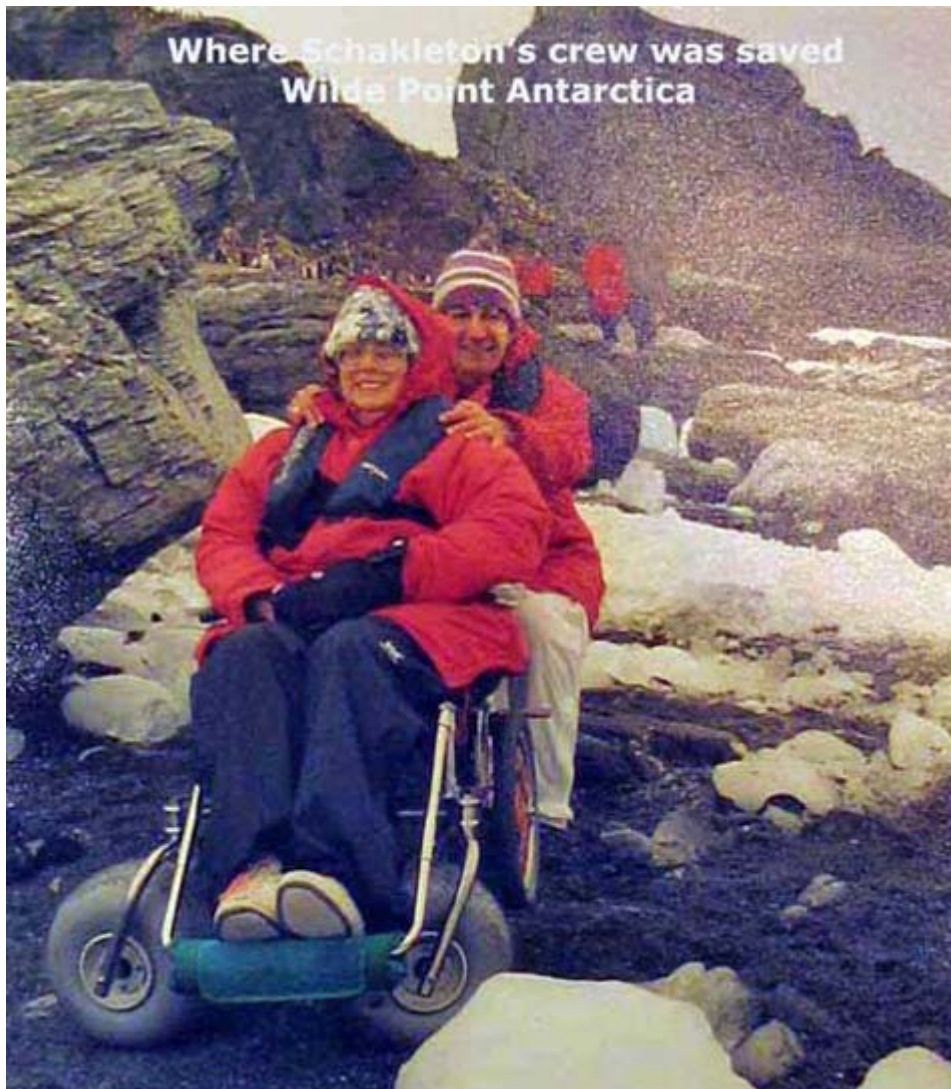


Figure 7: Nancy getting in to Zodiac (Berger, 2008)



3.4 Virtual Classrooms

Well Antarctica may be just beyond their fingertips for some people, there are still ways it can be reached. A program runs out of Albany, Oregon that helped adults with learning disabilities. In 2005 they took on a program entitled “The Antarctic Project” (NCAL, 2005). The topic of Antarctica was used to stimulate interest in adults who were illiterate, had poor computer skills, or were otherwise slow in their analytical logic. Various problems or tasks were set forth to develop, reading, writing, analysis, electronics, math skills, group work and critical thinking, all with Antarctica themes. To further cement the learning an interaction with Antarctica was arranged. The scientists of Palmer station agreed to do three video chats with the students. These live links really brought the students to the ice in ways they never would have imagined. The tours took them to visit penguin rookeries, examine Antarctic plants, and see the bases. Questions were posed about the food chain, ozone hole, climate, and life in extreme environment. It was really a great way to make Antarctica a reality and see how people lived and work on the Ice. Furthermore, small experiments were staged in the classroom which correlated to work being done by the scientists 1000’s of miles away. With these valuable skills now possessed by the students, a new level of confidence existed as they felt they could contribute something to a conversation and society. There was a greater awareness of the world around them and the role in which they played. Having these new skills was an invaluable experience inspired by Antarctica.

Section 4: Prospects of Disabled Tourism in Antarctica

4.1 Growing Age

The typical Antarctic tourist is a 60 year old retired professional (IAATO, 2008). In today's world of Antarctic tourism, prices are going down and numbers are going up. Traveling to Antarctica is in reach of more people, this include old and young. Medicine has also been advancing. This will have a cause and effect relationship in that more people will be given the go ahead from doctors to travel. There may be an influx of guests with hearing aids, minor vision impairments, the use of canes or when wheelchair bound.

4.2 Accessibility

Currently the accessibility for disabled people varies greatly from ship to ship but is generally very minimal. Life aboard a ship can be rough therefore the captains warn all their potential passengers of the dangers that may occur. Basic accommodations such as handlebars on stairs and elevators are more common. Ships often included slim doorways with huge lips, small rooms and even smaller bathrooms. Well a two inch door guard may go unnoticed to the average person, to someone wheelchair bound it can be monumental. Due to the impracticalities and expenses of having a wheelchair bound passenger some tourist companies blatantly put off such potential tourists right from the start. For example the company Antarctica XXI states: "The ship has no special provisions for severely handicapped persons. Doors are heavy and not too wide. Outside doors have sills. Metal decks can be slippery and icy." Antarctica XXI is a member of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators which has no standard for handicap facilities (IAATO).

Another prominent name in the tourist industry is Quark Enterprises. On their website it states after warning of steep walkways that "None of our ships is equipped with handicap facilities."(Quark) They follow up in the small print of their terms and conditions that "by forwarding of deposit, the passenger certifies that he/she does not have any mental, physical or other conditions or disability that would create a hazard for himself/herself or other passengers"(Quark). This phrasing appears in the majority of travel brochures.

Even the ever helpful guide book Lonely Planet fumbles to tell one to consult tourist operators when questioned about handicap adaptations. The matter is left open saying they would be "happy to give you advice to try and assist you in choosing a holiday that will meet our requirements. However, most of our holidays are in destinations which are off the beaten track and lack even the simplest faculties for disabled guests" (Abercrombie and Kent)

There are some companies who are open and willing to work with these clients. Cruise Norway and Abercrombie and Kent have handicap adapted facilities with handle bars and bigger doorways fully accessible to wheelchairs. They do ask that heavily disabled persons travel with a companion. On this ship the excursions are not suitable for people whose disabilities limit them to wheelchairs.

A local name, Heritage Expeditions can accommodate for travelers with minor visual and hearing impairments. They have also been known to have guests who have experienced strokes and thus have limited mobility but are not wheelchair bound. About once a year, someone will inquire about wheelchair accessibility. These numbers have not yet increased with the rising tourist numbers. Well willing it is costs that inhibit accommodating for wheelchair bound guests. Heritage Expeditions service a minimal portion of Antarctic Tourism with two trips of 100 passengers.

For those ships with out handicap facilities money may be a huge issue as well. It is very expensive to overhaul a boat with ramps etc for such a small number of guests. Despite the initial expense, profits has potential in the long run, “Research shows that disabled people are loyal customers, often returning to places that provide good accessibility. Other people may also benefit from improved accessibility- for example, parents with pushchairs, people with injuries, and tourists with heavy luggage” (Westcott, 2004).

It seems only necessary that other disabilities will have to be accommodated for if the Antarctic Tourism continues to grow as it does. “It is essential that countries that wish to expand their incoming travel markets should have the necessary facilities in place and an understanding of how to service the special needs of tourists with disabilities” (Shaw-Lawrence,1999).

Table 1: Requirements from select tourist groups

Tour Group	Medical	Insurance	Accessible	Passenger numbers
Peregrine	Required, all ages	Required, extensive coverage	N/A	53, 110
Expeditions	Responsibility of passenger	Strongly urged	N/A	49, 110
Aurora	Responsibility of passenger	Strongly recommended	N/A	100
Marco Polo	Required, extensive vaccinations included	Required	Yes, accessible but difficult, no wheelchairs on excursions	826
Quark	Responsibility of passenger	Required, extensive coverage	No	82,110
Expedition Cruising to Antarctica	Responsibility of passenger	Strongly recommended	Yes, 1 room	107
Heritage	Required if over 70	Required	Minor limitations	48, 98

4.3 Medical Exams

The medical exam requirements vary on the different ships. Some require no medical forms but strongly suggest one. The medical facilities available onboard each ship varies as well. Usually, there will be a doctor on board with minimal equipment and medication. Travelers are told to bring their own daily medications. Heritage Expedition, is one of many, that require medical exams for passengers over the age of 70. Yet others find it mandatory for all guests. Exams would have different levels of tests to carry out as well. Most companies assume that if someone had a major disability it would be at the forefront of questions when choosing a tour outfitter. If something as drastic and sight impairments were disclosed until a medical exam, the guests runs the risk of losing a deposit. The number of disabled guests traveling has increased over the past couple years (Peterson, 2008). The medical forms for tourist ships are not as extensive and people who suffer from obesity, alcoholism, and lower levels of fitness find it easier to gain access.

For scientists traveling to Antarctica out of New Zealand the medical exams are much stricter. The exams can include extensive blood work and x-rays depending on the age, work type and location of the subject. Each case is catered to independently looking at how much the subject will be put at risk and their comrades. Alcoholics, Diabetics and people who suffer from depression can be accepted if their conditions are managed. Dr. Peterson reports that in the past 2 years none of his applicants have ever been wheelchair bound. Traveling to Antarctica is a demanding place that requires independence and physical and mental fitness. Subjects can be denied with a Body Mass Index over 35

4.4 Insurance

Taking people to such remote places comes with great risk. Having medical forms filled out before would reduce the chances of taking on a client of poor health. There are also different opinions on what insurance customers should have. Some require extra insurance, others only strongly recommend it. In the event of an emergency the biggest liability is a disabled person in a wheelchair who would be unable to ride the lift. There is no set standard on insurance or medical exam policies.

4.5 Virtual

Another spin off with the live link in to the classrooms is a new world of virtual reality. This could recreate the world of tourism providing “a broad range of travel experiences. People could visit places that are not easily accessible such as the depths of the Amazon jungle or the frozen wastes of the Arctic of the Antarctic” (Cheong, 1995). Well many new issues would arise if the world of Virtual Reality Vacations became comparable to real life vacations, it would open new possibilities for disabled travelers. They would be able to fly over glaciers, visit penguin rookeries, and smell the salty ocean air without leaving the comfort of their own homes. “Such virtual experiences could have both positive and healing effects on the mental health of the incapacitated. The physically handicapped would no longer feel constrained while the ill could potentially make speedy

recoveries.”(Cheong,1995) The future will have to deal with the positive and negative repercussions of virtual reality tourism.

Conclusion:

The world in which we live in has always faced issues of incorporating disabled people in to it. It spans across all continents, races and creeds. Many steps have been made with Disability Acts established world wide. Once in place, enforcing the equal rights can be an even bigger hurdle. With all these laws there have always been gray ones, especially in the area of travel. As it stands, disabled persons traveling to Antarctica is minimal. It has been restricted to upper class individuals with excellent care takers and a strong will. It comes with hardships and is not catered too. The public awareness amongst disabled and non-disabled is lacking (Cruise-Norway). Currently, people with minor hearing or sight impairments are the majority. Mental tourism is limited to classroom work. Or as Rodney Russ stated “everyone who goes to Antarctica is a little bit, in some way mentally impaired, we all are to some degree”(interview). Many questions still need answered about travel in Antarctica, disabled traveling being one.

The End.

More questions....I feel like I could write a thesis on this:

Is it a luxury or a right? To what extent should the sites be altered to accommodate? When do the accommodations take away from the value of the place or trip? Is it too much of a risk for the disabled person and the other guests aboard cruise ships? A whole swarm of new questions are thrown in to the pot over uncharted waters of Antarctica. Whose laws should apply in a land with no nationality? Should some lesser disabilities be allowed and others not?

Email w/ cruise Norway:

Hi Sarah,

Thank you for your kind words. I never would have imagined that students working on Antarctic studies would concern themselves with disabled people travelling to that continent. I will, though, attempt to collect data regarding this, and revert to you. I don't believe that persons who are restricted to a wheel chair will be able to be transported on the zodiac craft that are used to land passengers. The zodiacs land passengers on a beach - they must negotiate a foot or two of shallow water in order to land, so I don't see how someone confined to a wheel chair can accomplish this. Sarah, I never even thought about this, but I will investigate. If you go to our "Antarctica" page on our web site, you can "click" onto the link that will lead you to pictures of ship interiors and deck plans. There are no pictures of cabins for the disabled, but they are about double the size of normal standard cabins. Send me your address, and we will send you a brochure.

best regards,

Mark

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